

Coronavirus: European Union seals borders for travellers

BRUSSELS/ ISLAMABAD/ WASHINGTON/ LONDON/TEHRAN: The European Union (EU) is banning travellers from outside the bloc for 30 days in an unprecedented move to seal its borders amid the coronavirus crisis.

The measure is expected to apply to 26 EU states as well as Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland. UK citizens will be unaffected. The ban came as deaths continued to soar in Italy and Spain, and France began a strict lockdown. The travel ban will affect all non-EU nationals from visiting the bloc, except long-term residents, family members of EU nationals and diplomats, cross-border and healthcare workers, and people transporting goods.

Europe has been badly hit by the virus, which has killed 8,000 globally. More than 200,000 people have been infected worldwide, according to the World Health Organization. Confirmed deaths in Europe reached at least 3,421 on Wednesday, AFP reported, passing the 3,384 documented fatalities in Asia, where the virus first began to spread. The worrying benchmark comes as Johns Hopkins University said there are 200,000 confirmed cases of Covid-19 worldwide. The number of confirmed infections has doubled globally in just 12 days.

Meanwhile, the world's richest nations prepared more costly measures on Tuesday to combat the global fallout of the coronavirus that has infected tens of thousands of people, triggered social restrictions unseen since World War Two and sent economies spinning toward recession. With the highly contagious respiratory disease that originated in China racing across the world to infect more than 200,000 people so far, governments on every continent have implemented draconian containment measures from halting travel to stopping sporting events and religious gatherings.

While the main aim is to avoid deaths - currently at over 8,000 - global powers were also focusing on how to limit the inevitably devastating economic impact. In the world's biggest economy, US President Donald Trump's administration has proposed pumping \$1 trillion into the market. Trump wants to send cash to Americans within two weeks as the country's death toll approached 100 and more testing sent the number of coronavirus cases to over 5,700. Airlines are among the worst-hit sector, with US carriers seeking at least \$50 billion in grants and loans to stay afloat as passenger numbers evaporate. Britain, which has told people to avoid pubs, clubs, restaurants, cinemas and theaters, unveiled a 330 billion pounds rescue package for businesses threatened with collapse. France is to pump 45 billion euros of crisis measures into its economy to help companies and workers, with output expected to contract 1% this year. The European Union eased its rules to allow companies to receive state grants up to 500,000 euros or guarantees on bank loans to ensure liquidity. Budget forecasters said the scale of borrowing needed might resemble the vast amount of debt taken on during the 1939-1945 war against Nazi Germany. "Now is not a time to be squeamish

about public sector debt," Robert Chote, head of the Office for Budget Responsibility, which provides independent analysis of the UK's public finances, told lawmakers.

Underlining how the crisis has shaken even the most august of institutions, Britain's Church of England suspended services while 93-year-old Queen Elizabeth was to move from Buckingham Place to Windsor Castle outside London, where she and her sister, Margaret, were sent for safety during the blitz of London in World War Two.

Meanwhile, China withdrew the press credentials of American journalists at three US newspapers on Wednesday, intensifying a bitter fight between the world's top two economies over the spread of coronavirus and press freedoms. The move comes after Beijing expelled three Wall Street Journal correspondents — two Americans and an Australian — last month following an opinion column by the newspaper that called China the "real sick man of Asia," reported foreign media on Thursday. The day before, the United States had announced that it would begin treating five Chinese state-run media entities with US operations the same as foreign embassies. China denounced the newspaper's column as racist and, after the newspaper declined to apologise, revoked the visas of the three reporters in Beijing. Another reporter with the paper had to leave last year after China declined to renew his visa.

Meanwhile, a 103-year-old woman in Iran has recovered after being infected with the new coronavirus, state media reported, despite overwhelming evidence the elderly are most at risk from the disease. The woman was the second elderly patient in Iran to have survived the disease. The other was a 91-year-old man from Kerman, in the southeast of Iran, the news agency said. After being sick for three days, he recovered on Monday despite having pre-existing medical conditions including high blood pressure and asthma, it added.

While President Donald Trump on Wednesday announced the closure of the US-Canada border to non-essential travelers as the coronavirus epidemic intensified in both countries -- but said that trade would not be impacted. The shutdown built on Trump's barring of visitors from most of Europe, China and other parts of the world, as the number of confirmed virus cases in the US surged past 6,500, with 115 deaths. "We will be, by mutual consent, temporarily closing our Northern Border with Canada to non-essential traffic. Trade will not be affected. Details to follow!" Trump tweeted. Canada's Foreign Minister Francois-Philippe Champagne said Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was also expected to make an announcement on the issue, without providing specifics.

Seeking to stem an outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, more than half of Iraq's 18 provinces have declared curfews of several days from Tuesday. But the government's social distancing efforts are facing a hurdle, as pilgrims defy restrictions to commemorate the anniversary of the death of revered Shia Imam Musa al-Kadhim.

In occupied Kashmir an Indian soldier, his wife and child have been tested positive for coronavirus in Ladakh. The family hails from Chuchot village in Leh district of Ladakh. The soldier was on leave from Feb 25 to March 1. During the leave period he was staying with his family and helping out as his father who returned from a pilgrimage in Iran had been quarantined since February 29.

The COVID-19 pandemic will push millions more into unemployment, underemployment and working poverty, the United Nations said Wednesday, warning that workers globally stood to lose up to \$3.4 trillion in income this year alone. "Falls in employment mean large income losses for workers," the International Labour Organisation said, releasing a report showing workers stand to lose between \$860 billion and \$3.4 trillion by the end of 2020. More than 850 million young people, or about half the world's student population, are barred from their school and university grounds because of the novel coronavirus pandemic, UNESCO said Wednesday.

Calling it an "unprecedented challenge," UNESCO said schools had been closed in 102 countries, with partial closures in 11 more -- with more closures to come. "Over 850 million children and youth -- roughly half of the world's student population -- had to stay away from schools and universities," the UN educational organisation said in a statement.

Meanwhile, the European Union accused Russia of putting lives at risk Wednesday by mounting what it said was a "significant campaign" to spread false or misleading information about the coronavirus pandemic. An internal EU document seen by AFP warned pro-Kremlin media outlets are promoting disinformation about COVID-19 in order to make the crisis worse in the West by undermining trust in healthcare systems. "Pro-Kremlin disinformation messages advance a narrative that Coronavirus is a human creation, weaponised by the West." Russia strenuously denied the accusations. "If there was even a single concrete example, I could comment on it but once again they are just unfounded allegations," foreign ministry spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

Meanwhile, the EU and China have decided to cancel their upcoming summit in Beijing because of the coronavirus pandemic, a spokeswoman for the bloc said on Wednesday to allow both sides to concentrate on their response to the COVID-19 pandemic," EU spokeswoman Virginie Battu-Henriksson told AFP.

Meanwhile, Malaysia's prime minister issued a plea for people to stay at home to halt the spread of the coronavirus, after a chaotic start to new restrictions. Authorities have ordered the closure of schools and most businesses for two weeks, as well as banning Malaysians from travelling overseas and foreigners from entering the country, after virus cases surged. While many parts of the capital Kuala Lumpur were quiet as the restrictions kicked in, there were signs not everyone was taking them seriously.